



Picture source: Ozark Radio News, 2022

# Effective Coordination with Towing Companies for Incident Response and Clearance

Contact: Henry Brown, University of Missouri  
Principal Investigator, 573-882-0832, [BrownHen@missouri.edu](mailto:BrownHen@missouri.edu)

This document is a technical summary of the final report to the Missouri Department of Transportation, project #TR202514, cmr25-014.

## Introduction

Tow truck operators are exposed to traffic when responding to incidents. Stalled vehicles on the highway can hinder safety and operations on the highway and can create a risk of secondary incidents. Fast and effective removal of stalled vehicles on the highway can improve traffic operations and safety for tow truck operators and all users of the transportation system. This document synthesizes existing department of transportation (DOT) practices and tow operator perspectives regarding coordination between DOTs and towing companies and identifies potential collaboration and training opportunities that will improve towing worker safety as well as traffic safety by improving incident response and clearance.

## Tech Brief Sources

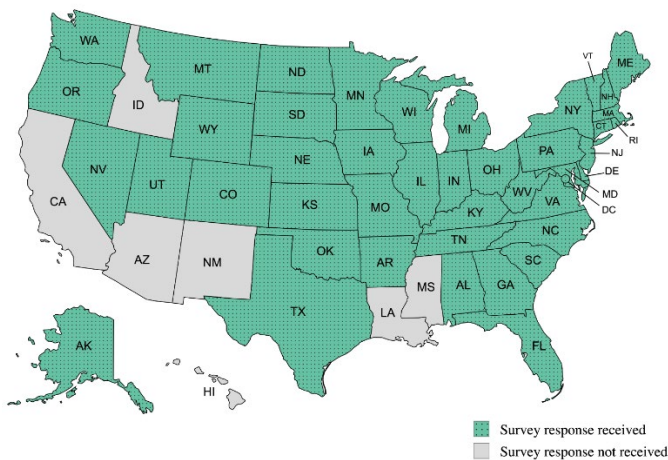
This document summarizes the results from the following four instruments:

- DOT surveys
- DOT interviews
- Tow operator survey
- Tow operator focus group

## DOT Practices

DOT practices were synthesized through the review of DOT-specific resources, DOT survey, and DOT interviews. The DOT survey consisted of 13 questions and was distributed to all 50 state DOTs and the District of Columbia. Forty-four survey responses were received. Figure TB1 shows the geographical distribution of the responding states. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the following four DOTs: Georgia, Nevada, Oregon, and Virginia.

Transportation  
Research  
TechBrief



### Figure TB1. National DOT Survey Coverage

Regarding general strategies and requirements used by DOTs, training programs and coordination with the state towing association are the strategies most used for partnering with the towing industry. Rotational list is the most common type of dispatching for towing. Law enforcement and local towing boards typically maintain towing rotation lists. The most common type of requirement for towing companies is insurance.

Table TB1 presents strategies used by DOTs and their perceived effectiveness. Towing Recovery Incentive Program (TRIP) was the highest rated strategy that provides incentives for towing companies to clear incidents within a specified timeframe.

**Table TB1. Strategy Effectiveness**

Strategy	Average (high=5)	Standard Deviation	# of Ratings
TRIP	3.88	1.36	8
Training Programs	3.42	1.21	26
Coordination with State Tow Trucking Association	3.26	0.96	23
Enhancements to Towing Dispatch Procedures	3.08	0.90	12
Other	3.00	1.41	2

Here are some examples of TRIP practices:

- Towers are assigned to specific zones and selected through a bidding process.
- Incentive payments for meeting TRIP requirements range from \$2,500 to \$4,000 per incident. In some states, payments are also made for mobilization for cancelled TRIP calls, clearing of stalled vehicles, and use of special equipment.

DOTs have found TRIPs to be beneficial in clearing incidents sooner and ensuring that a towing vendor with the proper equipment and qualifications responds to a TRIP event. Studies have found benefit cost ratios for TRIPs ranging from 9.2 to 1 to 25.56 to 1.

Regarding coordination practices, meetings at regular intervals, designated personnel to serve as liaisons, and meetings at irregular intervals are the most used methods for coordinating with the towing industry. DOTs also include towing companies in TIM-related organizations and initiatives. For collaboration with other organizations, responding DOTs collaborate most often with law enforcement, including both state police and local police, for towing response and recovery.

The most common type of resource developed by DOTs/states for partnering with the towing industry is training materials. Training is provided in various forms, such as TIM training and TRIP-specific training. Example approaches to training include adapting FHWA training materials, consultant-led programs, and delivery by experienced tow operators to enhance credibility and effectiveness. DOTs also provide resources (e.g., training, guidelines for emergency traffic control and scene management, checklists) related to TIM.

Eighteen responding DOTs indicated that their state has enacted laws related to towing. Examples of types of laws and regulations related to towing include the following:

- Move Over Laws
- Requirements for maintenance of towing rotation lists
- Requirements for rates, wrecker classes, weight limits, tow truck permits, inspections, lighting, safety regulations, and procedures for storage and filing complaints

The most perceived challenges to DOTs' efforts to effectively clear incidents using towing and recovery are the need for coordination among agencies and communications issues. Examples of challenges cited in the DOT interviews include delays due to work zones and traffic congestion, limited access to equipment and personnel in rural areas that can complicate timely response, the need for improved coordination across jurisdictions for cross-state incidents, abandoned RVs, staff turnover, and the need for training on electric vehicles (EVs).

### MTTA Coordination

Coordination with MTTA occurred through an informal focus group and a survey that was administered to MTTA membership. The survey included four multiple choice questions and one open-ended question. Survey results indicate that MTTA respondents are most interested in partnering with MoDOT on training programs and enhanced coordination with MTTA. In addition, MTTA respondents perceive safety of tow workers, need for training, and the risk of secondary incidents as the greatest challenges to towing safety and to effectively clearing incidents using towing and recovery (see Table TB2). The training topics of most interest to MTTA respondents are best practices, equipment requirements, and considerations for EVs and fire risk.

**Table TB2. Challenges to Safety & Effectiveness**

Challenge	Count
Safety of tow workers	9
Need for training	5
Risk of secondary incidents	5
Driver inattention	4
Equipment requirements	4
Liability issues	4
Communications issues	3
Need for coordination among	3
Vehicle speeds	2
Regulatory barriers	1
Slow detection of incidents	1
Need for performance data	0
Other	0
<b>Total Respondents</b>	<b>13</b>

At the focus meeting, researchers obtained feedback from MTTA in three categories as presented below.

#### Issues directly related to MoDOT

- MTTA would like closer communications with MoDOT concerning projects and would like to be informed of the start of major projects.
- MTTA members expressed various concerns with TRIPs.
- MTTA members have a desire to be better trained for TIM whether as individuals or part of TIM teams.

#### Issues that might not be influenced by MoDOT directly

- When towing occurs in remote or rural areas and during sparse traffic conditions, towing operators feel very exposed to oncoming traffic.
- MTTA expects public agencies, such as MoDOT, to assist them with TTC.
- MTTA would like to see regulations that improve the quality of operators such as minimum requirements for operations, a base certification, and proper equipment for the type of work required.

- MTTA would like to work with MoDOT and other TIM partners to strategize on how to best manage incidents involving EV fires.

#### Private issues of the towing industry

- MTTA would like to see insurance rules changed, such as a minimum insurance level or providing a mechanism for recovery.
- Since the Missouri State Highway Patrol (MSHP) has complete discretion in the dispatching of tow trucks, tow companies do not feel that they can turn down a dispatch call because otherwise MSHP might not call the company again.

#### Summary of Opportunities

This TechBrief identifies potential opportunities for MoDOT and the State of Missouri to enhance its coordination practices with MTTA. These opportunities are summarized below.

- MTTA could be invited during the planning process of major projects so that the MTTA membership could be better prepared to handle additional demand.

- Implementation of a TRIP program in Missouri could be explored for the major metropolitan areas (i.e., Kansas City, St. Louis, Columbia, Springfield). This exploration would likely require outreach and education with MTTA to help improve their understanding of the program and alleviate their concerns.
- Enhance TIM training opportunities for tow operators in Missouri.
- MoDOT could provide general support in facilitating TTC training of towing operators and partnering in the promotion of greater statewide safety efforts in work zones and incident management.
- Implement regulations that improve the quality of operators such as minimum requirements for operations, a base certification, such as TIM training, vehicle inspection, and proper equipment for the type of work required.
- Work with MoDOT and other TIM partners to strategize on how to best manage incidents involving EV fires.
- Cross training with tow companies. This could potentially involve meeting with tow companies on a regular basis to coordinate and discuss any concerns.

---

**Researchers** – This study was conducted under contract number TR202514, by Henry Brown, Carlos Sun, and Zhu Qing of the University of Missouri.

**Key Words** – towing & recovery, traffic incident management, worker safety

**Disclaimer** – The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this document are those of the investigators. They are not necessarily those of the Missouri Department of Transportation, U.S. Department of Transportation, or Federal Highway Administration. This information does not constitute a standard or specification.



Recommended citation: MCTI. (2025). *TechBrief: Effective Coordination with Towing Companies for Incident Response and Clearance*. Missouri Center for Transportation Innovation.

September 2025